
The Goethe-Universität’s distinguished Emeritus Professor Gustav Adolf Seeck has produced close and careful commentaries on Plato’s Theaetetus (2010) and Statesman (2012); in between them comes the present volume, on the Sophist.

As early as its Foreword Seeck’s book begins with a self-denying, or possibly self-liberating, ordinance. Seeck tells us that it will «nieht in die kaum noch über-schaubare wissenschaftliche Diskussion einführen»; rather, it will simply «das dort manchmal ins Hintertreffen geratende unmittelbare Verständnis des Wortlaufs sicherstellen» (3). This is not of course to say that Seeck ignores or bypasses this often overwhelming and distracting scholarly literature on the Sophist; in this book his own ability to maintain an overview of it, as it has proceeded in a number of different languages, is everywhere apparent. But it does set him free to concentrate, as he says, on directly establishing the actual meaning of Plato’s own words, and providing line-by-line discussions to direct his readers through the dialogue’s sometimes labyrinthine arguments. In these Mazes Seeck proves himself a kindly, wise, learned, and perceptive guide: the students who are clearly one principal audience for this book might go far before they found a better one.

Already in the Foreword there are foreshadowed a number of Leitmotive that will be important later in the book. One is Seeck’s concern to see Plato in his historical context. Plato, he for instance says (3–4), owes to ‘contemporary discussion’ the method of division – «die Methode, sehr allgemeine Begriffe wie das ‘Können’ (technē) in immer kleiner werdende Unterbegriffe aufzuspalten». Or again, rather later in the book, we hear (76) of Plato’s distinction between poiein and faschein (247d8–e2) that «es muß sich um ein Zitat aus der zeitgenössischen kosmologischen Diskussion handeln».

Here and elsewhere, the question is simply ‘why muß?’. Going back to Seeck’s claim about the method of division, Seeck does not tell us why we should accept it – why it is not possible that Plato invented the method of division himself. Of course Plato had antecedents with an interest in divisions of various sorts. Among them were the Zenonian interest in infinite divisions that Seeck’s own «immer kleiner werdende» rather misleadingly suggests; the theory of elements sketched in ‘Socrates’ Dream’ at Theaetetus 201d–202d; and of course the Democritean method of dividing down till one reaches the basic constituents of reality in atoms and the void. But those are quite different from the Platonic method of division; and as the instance of Socrates’ Dream shows, Plato is quite capable of indicating it to us when a view he discusses has a peculiar or extraneous source. Seeck’s obiter dictum gives us no reason to suppose that Plato himself was not the originator of the method of division; Plato’s own works, from the Republic and Phaedrus onwards, give us positive reason to suppose the opposite.

Some of the other historical speculations that Seeck offers along the way seem, to me at least, to be no more firmly grounded. Three more examples: (a) 91 (on 241d3–e4) «ein typischer sophistischer Formalismus»: well, it’s a formalism. Why typically sophistical, though? The Visitor just delineates the possibilities. Why is that sophistical rather than, say, Platonic? (b) 121–22: Why assume that
there’s some grammarian’s book in the background of Plato’s onoma/ rhêma distinction? (c) 134: If Plato uses three infinitives in a row at 267c5, why must he be quoting someone else?

Another important Leitmotiv already visible in the Foreword is Seeck’s claim that the Sophist is not really about the sophist. He takes it that «Der Titel Sophistes ist irreführend»; for “es geht in Wirklichkeit nicht um den Sophisten, sondern um bestimmte begriffliche Probleme, für die der Sophist nur als Beispiel dient» (3).

As contrasts go, this strikes me as a little overdrawn. Readers of the Republic do not have to choose between saying that its topic is ‘What is the perfect politia?’ and saying that its topic is ‘What is justice?’ (and, perhaps, various related problems); instead they can, and indeed should, say that its topic is both. Nor do readers of the Statesman have to choose between saying that its topic is ‘What is the perfect statesman?’ and saying that its topic is ‘What is just rule?’; they too both can and should say both. Similarly with the Sophist, there is no need to think that it must be either about defining the sophist, or about particular conceptual problems for which the sophist serves as no more than an example. The Sophist is about the question ‘What is a sophist?’; but just for that reason it also has to be about a number of ‘particular conceptual problems’. If the Sophist is really about the sophist, then it must also be about not-being and imitation, because the sophist characteristically is an imitation philosopher, and is not a real one (and characteristically denies the very idea of a real/imitation distinction).

And it must also be about the difference between true statements or beliefs and false statements or beliefs, because the sophists characteristically denied that there was any such difference. And so it must also be about the nature of language and reality themselves, because there can be no proper account of falsehood and non-reality without accounts of truth, meaning, and reality. The fact that the Sophist is about all of these topics is not, then, evidence against the claim that its topic is the nature of the sophist. It is evidence for that claim.

The nature of the Sophist’s key preoccupations sheds light, too, on another puzzle that is often raised about it, the puzzle of how it is related to the Theaetetus. In the Theaetetus, Plato uses problems about the nature of perception and belief, and the nature of false belief, to cast doubt on a movement of philosophical thought—mostly unknown to us now, except through his writings—that we may call both relativist and empiricist, and which Plato identifies with the authority of Heracleitus and Protagoras. As I read the Theaetetus, its strategy is to reduce this relativist-empiricist school to absurdity, by showing that it has no coherent account of knowledge, or of the nature of justification in belief, or of the difference between true and false belief, or indeed even of the nature of belief, semantic structure, or mental content itself. But that strategy naturally raises the question, of its proponent, ‘So how would you do better?’ The Sophist is—among other things—a answer to this question. In the Theaetetus Plato shows
us how others have failed to make sense of false belief, or indeed of any belief or semantic structure at all; in the Sophist he shows us something about how he proposes to make sense of them. The demonstration is enthralling for a number of reasons; one central reason is because it goes so far beyond the hand-waving rhetoric and vague promissory notes of the Republic. All too often the Republic had been happy merely to promise some vague and unarticulated solution to our logical and conceptual difficulties, some “göttliches Wissen” as Seeck often calls it (e.g. 136; cp. “absolutes Wissen” 35, “ein Wissen höherer Ordnung” 98), which it airily forecast would come to us from the Forms. The wonder of the Sophist is how specific, detailed, and ingenious an account Plato is able to give us, on the basis of something still very like the Republic’s theory of Forms, of the nature of not-being and the structure of the world; and of the nature of falsehood and false belief, and the structure of language and meaning. In doing this he is, most certainly, working towards the objective of being able to tell us what a sophist is, and how a sophist differs from a true philosopher. He is also answering fundamental questions raised by the Theaetetus, but left unanswered there (unnecessarily, given its aporetic structure and its destructive intent). At the same time as achieving both these things, he is, of course, achieving a third: he is laying the foundation-stones of the entire western philosophical tradition of thought about existence, meaning, and truth. The three activities are in no sense in competition. Rather they are one and the same activity, three ways described.

The details of the Sophist’s discussion of the basic structure of reality and meaning, and so also of unreality, falsehood and meaninglessness, are undeniably technical, and there is of course a great deal of scholarly controversy over them. True to his opening promise, Seeck does not get drawn into these controversies—a feature of his commentary which will perhaps disappoint his more technically-minded readers, and no doubt equally relieve undergraduates who use his book.

At times Seeck’s willingness to avoid the technical difficulties seems to me to lead him into difficulties of a more basic kind. For example, he seems happy to suppose (17, 97) that the scholastic terminology of genus proximum and differentia specifica, and (124) the modern terminology of subject and predicate, can harmlessly be imported into the Sophist. But this is at least an anachronism, and possibly a more dangerous elision than that. A more obvious danger still comes from Seeck’s terminology—unfounded in Plato’s text, but introduced into Seeck’s discussion as early as p.3—of “Überbegriff” and “Überbegriffe” (see e.g. 107, 113, 116–7, 119, 123). It is easy to see why one would be tempted to talk this way. But it makes it sound as if a concept’s being more general had more explanatory power according to the theory of the Sophist; and as a rule, that is not so. In the Sophist’s theory, the key to explanatory power, as Plato is careful to explain, is not ever-greater generality, but symplóke, interweaving—not a hierarchical relation but a mutual one.

1 For a full defence of this admittedly controversial reading of the Theaetetus see my ‘Reading Plato’s Theaetetus’, Boston: Hackett 2004.
This possibly pedantic-sounding point has crucial consequences. It means, for instance, that there is no force to Seeck’s rather puzzled-sounding complaint (103, 115) that Plato’s talk of interweaving with the Other still contains a negation as Plato uses it, inasmuch as ‘other than x’ just means ‘not x’. This complaint misses the central point of Plato’s argument about ‘is not’. Plato’s aim is to show that it is possible to make a *saevis veritate* replacement of every occurrence of ‘is not’ with ‘is other than’. Since the truth is preserved by this analysis, it remains true, as Seeck observes, that every occurrence of ‘is other than’ is equally paraphrasable back into an occurrence of ‘is not’. But to take this to be an *objection* to Plato’s proposal is to miss the point, which is not to do away with ‘is not’, but to show how to make sense of it. (Not to subsume ‘is not’ in a hierarchy of concepts, but to show what concepts are interwoven, and how, in our talk about ‘is not’.) Plato takes it that he has made sense of this talk, if he can give an analysis of ‘is not’ that does not commit him to making Not-Being one of the five greatest kinds, or indeed a (substantive) kind at all. Thus far forth, the theory of the *Sophist*, surely, is just successful.

On the issue of the connections between the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* Seeck’s state is apparently not one of puzzlement: he sees connections too, though it is curious, given that he has written books on both, that he does not say more about those connections in this book. On the question whether the *Sophist* is really about the sophist, however, Seeck’s doubts are still unresolved by the very last paragraphs of his Commentary (143). Why, he wonders, does Plato’s last and supposedly conclusive definition of the sophist have nothing about the sophist as teacher, or about his *Zersetzung traditioneller Werte*, which seemed such a threat to the state’s survival to «das konservative Bürgertum», a group perhaps including, at its more conservative end, Plato himself?

The answer to Seeck’s question is, I think, that the seventh and final division in the dialogue, at *Sophist* 264a—268d, *does* have things to say about both teaching activity and about false and relativistic teaching, though it is certainly true that Plato touches on these themes less directly here than in previous parts of the dialogue. To see this we should look more closely at the progress of the division. Picking up the threads from 235d—236c, the Eleatic Stranger distinguishes as follows:

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1 Hence Seeck cannot be right, either, to suggest that un-interweavability is a concept for Plato (94), or to see (114), das Nichtseide als an «Unterart des Seiendem».


3 Seeck habitually assumes that the Eleatic Stranger is Plato’s own mouthpiece. For large stretches of what the Stranger has to say, that seems justifiable enough. But Seeck goes further, and actually runs their names together: see e.g. 92, 91, and indeed passim der Gast (Platon). To me this elision seems to risk obliterating a question that remains interesting even if the Stranger is Plato’s mouthpiece, the question why, in that case, Plato uses the Stranger to speak through at all. Why not just take Plato’s text at its word, in line with Seeck’s own overall project, and not identify der Gast with ‘Platon’? Plato does little or nothing by accident; he surely had his reasons for not identifying himself directly with the xenos eletikos. He is after all no Eleatic.

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Productive skill vs. acquisitive skill (poiētīkē tekhnē/ kētīkē tekhnē, 264a7–g; cp.219b–c)

Divine production vs. human production (266a5)

Divine production of things vs. divine production of images of things, e.g. perceptual images (266a9–c6)

Human production of things vs. human production of images of things, e.g. artistic (266c7–d8)

Human production of images of the faithful-copying sort (eikastikon) vs. human production of images of the deceptive-semblance sort (phantastikon) (266d9–e6)

Human production of images of the deceptive-semblance sort by way of instruments vs. the same by way of one’s own body (mimēsis) (267a1–b2)

Knowledgeable vs. ignorant (merely opinion-based) mimēsis (267b1–c4)

Opinion-based mimēsis where the imitator does not realise his own ignorance, vs. opinion-based mimēsis where he does realise his own ignorance but speaks ironically (eirōnikōn mimētēn) (267e5–268a10)

Public, long-winded ironic speech of this sort—oratory—vs. private irony in short speeches—which is what sophistry is (268a10–c4)

It is a striking fact about this tree of divisions that Plato’s discussants apparently have a place in it for Socrates. It almost seems that Plato wants to tempt us into saying that Socrates is the private, short-speechifying ironist. After all, irony (in some sense of the word1), private discussion, and shortness of speech were all clearly well-known features of Socrates’ modus operandi. We seem to be pointed in the same direction by Theaetetus’ answer to the Stranger’s question at 268b10 ti de ton heteron eurōmen, sophon e sophistikōn. Theaetetus responds that the person we are describing cannot be a sophos, because, like Socrates, he does not know.

But if this is how to place Socrates in the seventh division, then Socrates is a sophist, on what seems to be Plato’s own seriously intended account of what the sophist is. Can that be right? I don’t think it can, most obviously because whatever else eirōn may mean in other contexts, in this context it fairly plainly involves pretending to know things that you don’t know (bōs agnoei tauta ba pros tous allous bōs eidōs eskhēmatistai, 268a3–4); and this of course is precisely what Socrates did not do. The last division of the Sophist does remind us one more time how easy it would be to confuse Socrates with a sophist. But in the same breath it also reminds us of the key difference between him and the sophists—namely that Socrates, utterly unlike them, refuses to pretend to know anything at all.

So if the sophists’ place in the seventh division is not Socrates’ place, what is his place? A second temptation here would be to reply that Socrates has no place in the division at all, because it is a division of ways of producing, and Socrates produces nothing; he is a barren midwife (Thb 148e–151d). To give in to this

temptation would be a mistake. For one thing, Sophist 265a’s division of tekhne into ktetikè and poiètikè is intended to be exhaustive, and Socrates’ skill is clearly not ‘acquisitive’; so (unless the ktetikè/poiètikè division is itself misguided) his skill must be classified on the other, productive side. As this first argument shows, it is easy for us to be over-specific about what is meant by ‘production’ in the seventh division: apparently even an orator counts as a producer of something (268a10 ff). After all, Socrates also counts as someone who uses his body in an imitative way, which might seem equally surprising. Socrates then finds his place at the fourth step of the division, which distinguishes human production of images of the faithful-copying sort (eikastikon) vs. human production of images of the deceptive-semblance sort (phantastikon) (266b9–c6): Socrates is one of those who tell the truth, and therefore an eikastikos.

Is that all we can say about how to classify Socrates? No, because—although Plato does not spell this out—it is reasonable to think that the steps of the seventh division that are subsequently applied to the phantastikon can also be applied, even if they are not in the text of the Sophist, to the eikastikon sort of image-making. We can divide the eikastikon too by asking (the fifth step) whether instruments are used to produce the images in question. The answer, in Socrates’ case, will be ‘No’. Then we can ask (the sixth step) whether the production of images of the faithful-copying sort is done ignorantly or knowledgeably, and whether (the seventh step) the ignorant producer is ignorant of his own ignorance, or knows he is ignorant and speaks ironically. And now we have captured Socrates: he is the image-producer who is ignorant and speaks ironically, not (this time) in the sense that like an orator or an eristic he tries to hide his ignorance, but in the sense that he does not let it stop him from pursuing his questioning of others.

This gives us an account of what Socrates does. It also implies at least a programmatic account of what Plato thinks the true philosopher can do. (A more than programmatic account was presumably to be offered in the Philosopher: Sophist 254b3–4.) The true philosopher will be found at the sixth step of this same division: he is the producer of images of the faithful-copying sort, who produces them knowledgeably. That explains why Socrates is not a true philosopher—because he is to be found at a different point in the division. It also explains why Socrates, as well as not being a true philosopher, is not a sophist either. But he does occupy a position relative to the true philosopher in some ways closely analogous to the sophist’s. And that is the second reason why, in the sixth division, Plato is at least provisionally content to describe Socrates as a sophist.

As Seeck himself remarks as quoted above, scholarly disagreements can easily obscure the more basic lineaments of a thing. I hope these disagreements of mine with Professor Seeck about how best to read the Sophist will not obscure my very real admiration for his book.

Dundee

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